



City of Seattle Seattle Planning Commission

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January 9, 2004

Councilmember Nick Licata
Chair, Council Monorail COW
City Hall 601 5th Avenue
Seattle, WA 98104

Re: Planning Commission Recommendations/Input on Monorail Alignment and Station Locations

Dear Councilmember Licata:

The Planning Commission appreciates your interest in getting our input on the Monorail Alignment and Station Locations. These decisions on the Monorail's Green Line are of critical importance to the City of Seattle and of the neighborhoods affected by this project.

The Planning Commission has been involved, along with the Design Commission, in providing input on the monorail project since 2002. The Commission recently reviewed and offered comments on the Draft EIS and also has three Commissioners that participate in the Monorail Review Panel. Since the MRP has responsibility for overall design review of the project, the Planning Commission has focused on broader planning aspects of the project. We have coordinated with the MRP and its staff to ensure that collectively we address the range of issues that are important to the City in making its decisions regarding alignment and station locations.

Like the Monorail Review Panel, we are concerned about the City and the SMP making final alignment and station location decisions prior to the issuance of the Final EIS and when so much analysis is needed to determine feasibility of the system configuration and on a number of station locations. While we know this project is on a fast track, it seems counterintuitive to make these critical decisions that will fix the shape of the system before we have the analysis needed to guide such decisions. Particularly given the level of concern expressed by the Commission, the Monorail Review Panel (MRP), the City, other agencies and many community organizations about the lack of adequate analysis in the DEIS, it seems risky to make final recommendations at this point.

While the Planning Commission has not had the time or capacity to do an in-depth analysis of all of the alignment and station location options, it has identified important areas that need to be considered by the Council in forming its recommendations to the SMP Board. The Commission is drawing on its review of the Monorail DEIS, letters from a cross-section of community groups and agencies and its own discussion of the alignment and station locations.

The Planning Commission's comments focus primarily on suggested criteria that the City Council should use in evaluating the specific alignment and station locations. We provide some specific examples of areas where these criteria need to be applied drawing from DEIS comment letters from some community organizations. The Commission also makes some observations and suggestions regarding the process by which both general and specific decisions will be made on alignment and station locations. These reinforce the MRP's more detailed comments and recommendations and we strongly urge the City Council to work closely with that body in its decision-making process.

Comments on Alignment and Station Locations

The Planning Commission appreciates the Alignment Issues/Summaries that the City has prepared on key aspects of the system. We concur with their assessment and hope that our comments augment their work. The Commission recommends that the Council take a careful, systematic approach to evaluating the Monorail Alignment and Station Location alternatives, using the City's assessment and the Commission's suggested criteria. Below are a set of criteria we believe will be helpful in determining the alignment and station locations that provide the most benefit and are consistent with City policies and plans.

Criteria for alignment and station location:

The Commission recommends that the City identify and apply a set of criteria in analyzing and determining the final alignment and station locations. The aim of these criteria is to help the Council assess the extent to which alignments and station locations avoid impacts or minimize impacts that cannot be mitigated. These criteria should be applied consistently throughout the system as alignment and station location decisions are made.

The following are suggested criteria for consideration.

- **Consistency or divergence from Comp Plan and Neighborhood Plans**

One of the Planning Commission's duties is to serve as stewards of the Comprehensive Plan and of neighborhood plans for urban centers and villages. We urge the City Council to ensure that the SMP has demonstrated consistency with the Comprehensive Plan and in making their monorail alignment and station location decisions.

The Commission believes that the Monorail Alignment and Station locations are generally consistent with the Comprehensive Plan's goals for intermediate capacity transit throughout the city and increasing transportation choices and access in urban villages and centers. Overall the monorail alignments and station locations are generally consistent where neighborhood plans mentioned monorail; and with overall goals in most neighborhood plans to improve transit service and access, and creating a walkable urban village/center.

Several Comp Plan policies should be applied to specific alternative station locations and alignments, including T40 and T46, calling for integrating transit stations into existing communities to make it easy for people to ride transit and reach local businesses, provide adequate security, pedestrian amenities, and bike parking and minimize negative impacts on surrounding areas. In addition the SMP preferred alignment should be carefully assessed to ensure it is consistent with Comp Policies DT-TP5 and DT-TP8 which promote pedestrian circulation on streets and discourage skybridges respectively.

The Commission has concerns about the following areas and urges the Council to pay particular attention to plan consistency: Interbay is identified in the Comp Plan as one of the city's key industrial areas. Since there is little guidance from a neighborhood plan in terms of station location to

benefit the area, the Council should examine how these stations affect the City's intentions for this area; Seattle Center alternatives present very different impacts and benefits in terms of ridership and access which the Council should consider in its decision on area of the alignment and stations; and the Delridge station presents challenges regarding impacts on open space/drainage policies in both the Comp Plan and the Delridge neighborhood plan.

Finally, the scale of the stations, switches, turnbacks, and other ancillary structures have a potential impact on the vision of neighborhood plans for urban villages, particularly those at the end of the line. The City needs to be careful in how it conditions those stations to ensure that these features do not overwhelm smaller scale areas.

- **Effects on Adjacent Properties**

The final alignment and station locations should minimize displacement of and negative impacts on small businesses. These include visibility, access, identity and image of retail, commercial and residential properties that are adjacent to the monorail alignment and stations. The Council should consider the distributional effects on these local uses that all contribute to the health of both the small and large hubs of commercial and retail activity that define the station areas. Final decisions should include agreements regarding mitigation of unavoidable adverse impacts.

- **Design Guidelines**

The City Council should ensure that alignment/station locations are consistent with SMP and City design guidelines, including neighborhood design guidelines where they apply. Good urban design is critical in how well stations, switches, and ancillary structures fit into the communities where they are located. Design considerations include mass, shading, noise and light. This is an area where the MRP's specific advice will be critical to the City and the SMP.

The City and SMP should seek to minimize the scale of all support structures, including straddle bents, switches and mezzanines. The effect of these elements must be given careful consideration in station location decisions as the Council and SMP balance impacts related to alternative alignments, system configurations and station locations.

- **Historic and Cultural Resources**

The final alignment and station locations should have the minimum possible effect on historic buildings and cultural resources. Impacts of alignment height, proximity and the scale and design of stations should be examined and considered in these decisions. Appropriate mitigation should be identified and included in final decisions. Again, this is an area where the MRP's more detailed analysis and advice will be valuable to the City Council.

- **Downtown**

In the downtown corridor, the Planning Commission believes that the alignment should drive the station location (e.g. which side of the street) unless a strong reason to shift is identified that outweighs the negative impacts of shifting the alignment through the downtown corridor.

- **Traffic Operations**

The monorail alignment and station locations can have a significant impact on traffic operations, particularly where access on and off the street are reduced or eliminated by the alignment. The alignment should result in minimal impact on traffic operations including access to local businesses/residences, safety of vehicular and pedestrian movement, and on transit operations and safety.

▪ **Parking**

Parking is a major issue for businesses and residents in all station areas. There will be a loss of on-street parking and an increased demand for parking that will affect surrounding neighborhoods and nearby business areas. The final alignment and station location choices should minimize the loss of on-street parking in the station area and address the increased parking demand/impact on surrounding streets.

There are strong and conflicting opinions on the advisability of providing parking at stations for monorail riders. This is an area that the City should study carefully, particularly at the end-of-the-line stations and stations where there will be significant park-and-ride parking without intervention. While the Commission urges the City to maintain its commitment to not constructing park and ride lots in the city, citizens in the Morgan Junction, Avalon, SODO and Crown Hill areas have raised legitimate concerns about parking impacts that need to be addressed jointly by the City and SMP. If the City does consider dedicated parking, it should be based on demonstrated long term benefit to the neighborhood. This is a topic that should be addressed in more detail through station area planning.

Access

The alignment and station locations recommended for approval by the City should provide excellent pedestrian access to and from the station and adjacent activities. They should also be sited to take full advantage of transit service, but balancing the proximity of bus stops to stations with appropriate placement of these stops (minimizing negative impacts on store entrances, etc.).

Station locations should guarantee easy, safe pedestrian movement. This requires analysis of existing pedestrian movement and access to ensure the stations will not impede them or create safety problems. Key pedestrian generators should be defined and used in evaluating the merits of station location alternatives.

Ridership

Station locations should be selected to take advantage of the highest potential ridership. This should be a key consideration in all station locations, but particularly those where there are significant differences in potential ridership among alternative locations.

In the case of considering either additional stations or potential elimination of stations, the impact on ridership and service should be important considerations.

Comments on Process

The Seattle Monorail Project entails a complex process and we urge the City Council to clearly identify the City's decision authority and where those occur in the overall process. This is critical to the public's understanding of who is responsible for which decisions and to their ability to follow these processes.

We understand that the City Council will make formal recommendations to the SMP Board on a preferred alignment and station locations and that the SMP Board makes the final alignment/station location decisions. We also understand that the Transitway Agreement is an important decision point when the City grants to SMP use of the transitway or street rights-of-way where the monorail line will be constructed and operated. Finally, the City will make decisions within the MUP process that relate to specific design, operation and mitigation of impacts for each phase of the project.

The Planning Commission has several observations and recommendations regarding the process by which decisions will be made on the alignment and station locations.

- **Concept Level Approval**

The Commission's first recommendation is that the City Council approve a preferred alignment and station locations in concept – a conditional approval. The “final approval” of specific alignment and station locations would be given when adequate analysis and information is available. In our brief examination of the issues surrounding alignment, we find that there are many cases where there is simply not enough information to make an informed decision. While acknowledging that in large scale projects it is common that the relevant information cannot be available until later in the design process, it does seem that with the uncertainties of the DBOM agreement and the potential impacts, it would be wise for the City to withhold final approval until more information is available. This could occur before or at the time of the MUP application when a specific plan is submitted to the City for approval. This may result in a two step process for approving the transit-way agreement.

- **Transit-way Agreement**

To the extent possible the transit-way agreement should provide flexibility, but should articulate the process by which changes or additional City approval would be carried out.

The Planning Commission recognizes the need to balance the risk to the contractor if it is too constrained by the Transitway agreement and the risk if the agreement is too flexible and requires going back often for approvals. **Therefore the Commission recommends that the City clearly identify in its recommendations the conditions under which the SMP or the DBOM Contractor have to come back to the City (SDOT Director or City Council) to fully implement the transit-way agreement.** This would result in a performance-based agreement rather than just recommendations on a specific alignment and station locations.

In addition, the Commission recommends that the City Council build into the transitway agreement the City's preferences for stations that might be delayed if reduced revenues or higher costs require delayed construction of some stations. This provides the City a mechanism for expressing its position within this legal agreement so there is no uncertainty regarding the City's ability to influence such decisions if the situation arises.

- **DBOM Contract**

The final alignment and station location decision should clearly articulate thresholds and criteria that must be met by the contractor to meet the design and performance expectations of the preferred alignment/station locations. The MRP's advice should be sought by the Council as it considers these thresholds and criteria.

- **Station Area Planning**

While the City's Station Area planning has just begun, we urge the City Council and the SMP to ensure that there is congruency between the final alignment and station locations and the results of the urban design analysis and planning work that the City's Station Area Planning team is undertaking for each station area. The City should indicate clearly that the station area planning outcomes will be incorporated into the permitting process where applicable. This would apply particularly to recommended actions identified in station area action plans that appropriately should be the responsibility of the SMP.

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Thank you for this opportunity to share the Planning Commission's thoughts and recommendations on the Monorail Alignment and station locations. We hope that these comments and criteria are useful in your decision-making process. We urge Council to consider these comments and those of the Monorail Rail Review Panel as it makes its decisions regarding the alignment and station locations.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John Owen". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "John" being more prominent than the last name "Owen".

John Owen
Chair

cc: Councilmembers
Diane Sugimura, DPD
Grace Crunican, SDOT
Ethan Melone, SDOT
John Rahaim, DPD
Cheryl Sizov, DPD
Martha Lester, Council Central Staff
MRP members
Planning Commissioners